

# HOW TO... Collaborate using Google Docs

If you have a document that needs the care and attention of multiple users at once, Google Docs is ideal. Tim Danton explains how this group dynamic can benefit you

**G**oogle Docs has several advantages over Microsoft Office. It's free, anyone can view the documents you create at the press of a button and, most importantly, lots of users can co-create the document. Ten people can, at any given time, edit a document or presentation you've created (up to 50, if it's a spreadsheet). Whether you work in a business or at home, this is a compelling concept, especially as the changes are made in real time. Even if you live 500 miles away from the person with whom you are collaborating, you can share thoughts and improve what you are both viewing.

Clearly, this is more useful than sending an Excel document via email. Say, for example, that you're helping a relative to keep track of their bills. Rather than wait for them to email you and have to compare that week's entries with the previous week's, you can correct them on the fly. You don't need to worry that the corrections you make will be entered in the wrong document or get lost, because there is only one document. However, should you need to return to a previous version you can do so with ease.

Say you and a group of people write a monthly newsletter. Just set up a Google Docs spreadsheet to plan what's in each issue and then share the task of writing between you by

creating documents for each page. You can then see the changes that your friends are making (and even use the built-in chat feature to discuss them) and add some new suggestions yourself that they can see straight away. This means that there is no confusion or misunderstanding. It doesn't even matter where you are, or which computer you're using. Because the document is online, you can access it just as easily from an internet café as from your own laptop.

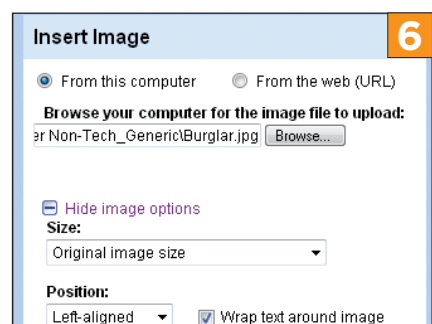
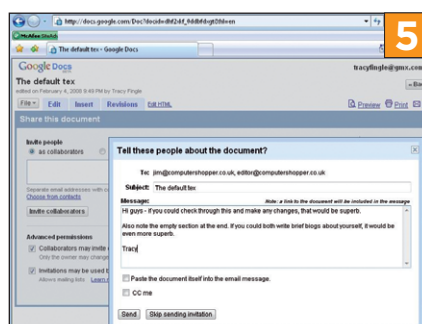
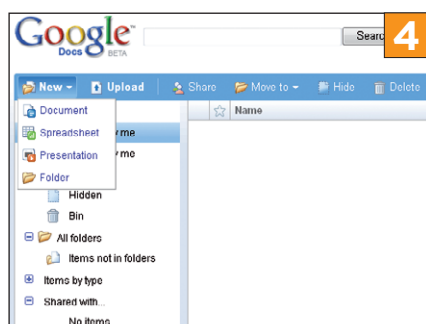
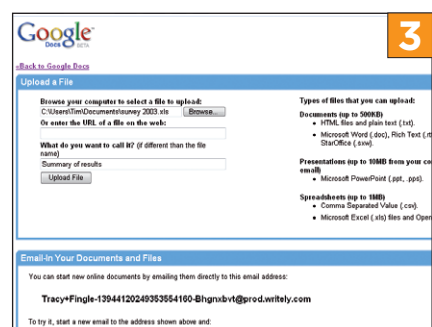
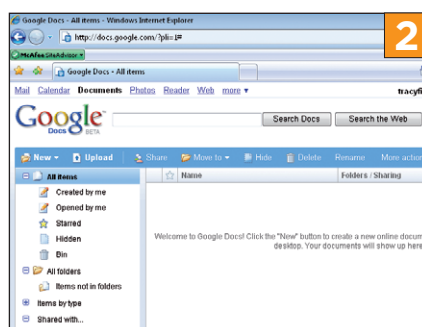
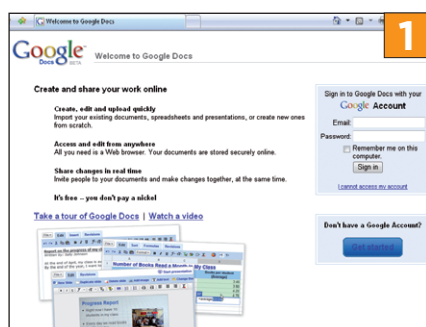
The only thing you need to remember is your password. In order to use Google Docs, you need a Google account. However, this doesn't mean you must have a Google Mail address. Simply sign up at <http://docs.google.com>. In this walkthrough, we'll show you everything you need to know, from signing up to publishing a finished document.

**1** When you arrive at Google Docs for the first time, you may find that your login details have already been filled in. This is most likely if you have a Gmail account, as your Google Account will be your Google email address. In this case, the password will be your Google Mail password. If you don't already have a Google account, press the blue 'Get started' button. Follow the simple steps, and you will

soon be signed up. The email address does not need to be a Google Mail account – it can be any existing address.

**2** This is your Google Docs homepage. It is dominated at the top by a search box. This is used to either launch the standard Google web search or search your existing documents (so if you've used the term 'cricket' in one of your Google documents, you can press Search Docs to find it). The top line is all about actions, things you can do with your documents. The left-hand bar can be thought of as your filing cabinet, where the documents you have created or are collaborating on can be stored.

**3** You don't have to start your documents from scratch. Google makes it easy to upload a spreadsheet, word document or presentation to your Docs homepage. Press the Upload button (below the Google logo) to reveal the screen shown below. There are three ways to upload your chosen file. You can browse to it on your computer, enter the URL of a file already on the web, or email your file to the unique address that is shown on the Upload webpage (it should be of the form <yourname>-1394414345354160-Bhgnxbvt@prod.writelife.com).



There are some restrictions on size – for example, spreadsheets can't be any larger than 1MB – but these aren't too limiting. Most document types are supported, including the most common created by Microsoft Office and OpenOffice, but users of Office 2007 should note that its new file formats aren't supported.

**4** Clicking on New activates a short drop-down menu with options to create a new Document (which is akin to a Word document), Spreadsheet, Presentation or Folder. Document and Spreadsheet are the most common choices, and selecting either produces a surprisingly rich array of options. If you choose New Document, as we have here, the default text looks quite basic but there are plenty of formatting options. If you select some or all of the text, you can make it bold or italic, underline it, change the font (there are currently a dozen fonts available), increase the size, change the colour – all the things that you've come to expect from Microsoft Word.

**5** Once you've created your document, it's time to share. Given the importance of this to the Google Docs ethos, the Share button is a little hidden. However, you'll find it just underneath 'Discard changes' at the top right of the window. You can invite people to be either collaborators (they must have a Google account registered to the email address you provide, but this is easy to sign up to) or viewers. Collaborators can make changes, and even invite other people to take part in the collaboration, while viewers can only see the document. This privilege can be removed at any time. Only the 'owner' (the original creator) of the document can delete it.

**6** Google Docs isn't limited to straightforward text documents. You can insert images just as you can in Microsoft Word, although there is less fine control over positioning. Make sure you click 'More image options', as this allows you to select the image

size and positioning and request for text to wrap around the image. If you don't select this, Google Docs will assume you want the image at its original size and won't wrap the text.

**7** When working on a spreadsheet, it's possible to have a live chat about the file. If you want to start the discussion, simply click on the Discuss tab, which sits to the left of Share, and start typing in the blue-edged box at the bottom of the window. Pressing Enter sends your message. Your fellow collaborator will see their Discuss tab turn bright orange, alerting them to a waiting message. However, the chat feature isn't available in word-processing documents.

**8** One feature common to spreadsheets and word-processing documents is the ability to save revisions automatically. In the latter, it's incredibly easy to spot the changes as Google Docs marks down what has been changed. By default, it shows only the most notable revisions – with a longer document, the revisions can run into the thousands – but you can drill down to particular revisions just by clicking a link (in the form Revisions 330-341). You can even compare revisions side by side.

Spreadsheets are more complex, so Google Docs doesn't show exact changes in the Revisions list. Instead, it says something like "3 days ago – timdanton – Made edits" and allows you to revert to that version of the spreadsheet.

**9** You can create and collaborate on presentations in Google Docs if you click the Presentation option. The results won't rival those of Microsoft PowerPoint 2007, but they are still worth a try. There are 15 themes to choose from, and it's phenomenally easy to use. You can also customise presentations with your own images and add a variety of basic shapes, but we think they are most effective if they are kept simple.

You might also find it easier to create the original presentation in PowerPoint and then upload it to Google Docs. We found it translated

the files well, with just a few minor formatting problems, such as text being a little too large and images not retaining their aspect ratios.

**10** If you're happy to sign up to Google Calendar, you can even organise an event based around a document. Say you want to invite friends to a birthday party. Put all the details into a document, complete with party-related clip art if you feel so inclined, add all your guests as collaborators, then click on the 'Create event with collaborators' link. This link can be found at the bottom-right of the screen when you click on the Share tab.

Then fill in the details, paying particular attention to the Where box. Google will cleverly use Google Maps to work out the destination, so entering your postcode will save on all the tedious direction-giving. Clicking Options allows you to set how you want reminders to appear (by email or pop-up) and when they should appear.

**11** In the screenshot below is the email that appears in your chosen collaborators' inboxes. They just click Yes, No or Maybe, and you will be notified automatically. Your collaborators don't need to sign up to Google Calendar. Outlook and Apple users, for example, can click on the iCal file that is attached to the emailed invitation, and this will enter the event automatically into their calendar.

**12** The final step, whether you're working on a document, spreadsheet or presentation, is to publish. This allows anyone to view your work, because it is given a unique web address on google.com.

This is not necessarily the end of the matter, however. If you want to make changes then it's easy to do so. Just go back into the document, make your changes and select Publish again. If you're the proud owner of a WordPress blog, it's also possible to publish your document there. Just make sure that you have your WordPress login details to hand.

